

**STATEMENT OF**  
**Georges Vernez**  
**Director, RAND Center for Research On**  
**Immigration Policy**

**Before the**  
**California Little Hoover Commission on**  
**Immigrant Integration**

**March 22, 2001**

---

The views presented in this statement are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of RAND or any of its sponsors

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to testify before you today on immigrant integration. You asked me to present my views regarding the following three questions:

- What do the terms “immigrant” and “integration” mean?
- What is the contribution and effects of immigrants?
- What are the key policy challenges?

Each of these questions raise controversial issues and I cannot do full justice to their complexities. I will, hence, make only a few points relevant to each question.

### **About the term “Immigrant”**

The term “immigrant” is generally used to describe a person born in a country other than the United States and who was not an American citizens at time of first entering the United States. The term describes an heterogeneous group of people who vary in country of origin, race/ethnicity, command of the English language, level of education, skills, age, family status, naturalization status, length of stay and a number of other demographic and economic characteristics. Typically, children born abroad who came here with their parents are also considered “immigrant”.

In the 1990s, a controversy developed-- in the context of estimating the costs of immigration to state and local public entities--as to whether the U.S. born children of immigrants should be counted as “immigrants”. Native-born children of immigrants are, by U.S. law, citizens, and from a legal perspective are not immigrants. However, had their parents not immigrated, they and their children would not be in the country in the first place, and hence would not be placing demands on schools and other federal, state, and local services. Whether one includes or includes these children—they are more than one third of school age children in California--from estimates of impact of immigration on state and local government budgets and public service delivery institutions make a significant difference. In turn, these estimates affect the way the public may view

immigration and federal and state relations regarding who should pay for the costs of services provided to these immigrants.

### **About the term “Integration”**

The term “integration” implies integration into some group, set of values, set of activities, and/or set of economic and social characteristics (e.g. home ownership). Hence, its meaning will differ for different people and in the end its definition is a political question.

In some European countries, integration means assimilation into most dimensions of national values including cultural and family life. In the United States, a sharper distinction is typically made between issues that may be in the broader public interest (e.g. adherence to democratic values) and issues that are in the private domain (e.g. wearing a religious symbol on one’s head).

In the United States, we, also, appear to be more pragmatic about our concerns with integration. In recent time, concerns have been raised that today’s immigrants may not be integrating at the same rate as equally large waves of immigrants at the beginning of the century along four main dimensions: naturalization, learning of the English language, participation in democratic institutions and processes, and use of public education, social, and health services.

We may value naturalization, or the decision to become a citizen, because it represents formal acknowledgment of an immigrant’s allegiance to the United States and eventual acceptance of American identity. Immigrants from Asia and Middle Eastern countries historically naturalize early and at high rates. Hispanic immigrants and Canadian immigrants have typically naturalized at slower rates as physical proximity allows for more frequent visits and contacts with the home country. Hispanics rate of naturalization has increased in the 1990s, however.

Knowledge and use of the English language is also broadly perceived as another indicator of immigrant's integration into civil society. The speed at which immigrants learn English depends in large measure on their level of education. However, nearly all children of immigrants acquire a working knowledge of English, and hence, the issue loses some of its salience in the space of one generation.

A shared belief in and respect for democracy and the responsibilities of civic participation is a major icon of American value and life. Hence, the extent to which immigrants actively participate in the democratic process may be yet another indicator of societal integration.

Concerns with the use of public services by immigrants are related to their economic mobility. Again, level of education is a major determinant of the economic mobility of immigrants. The earnings of low educated immigrants have been deteriorating, both relative to those of native-born workers and to those of earlier immigrants and are likely to remain low throughout their lives. These trends have contributed to the increase in income disparities within the state. These income disparities have increased more rapidly in California than in the rest of the nation.

There are many other measures that analysts have used to describe the progress immigrants make towards "integration". These include the extent to which immigrants and of their children join the middle class, become homeowners, intermarry with persons of another race, ethnicity, or country of origin, identify with an ethnic group or country of origin, and so on.

Maintaining an appropriate time perspective is important to today's debate about integration of immigrants. The "integration" of previous waves of immigrants did not occur over one generation, but over several generations. The speed with which an immigrant integrates varies depending on the dimension being considered, the level of education and/or skills of the immigrant, and other personal characteristics. Furthermore, the lenses through which we assess immigrant integration are distorted by the continuous

arrival of new immigrants in yearly waves that for the past 30 years have grown larger every year.

### **Contribution and Effects of Immigrants**

The contributions and effects of immigrants are by now generally well understood:

Immigrants contribute sizably to the nation's and, in particular, the California's economic growth. California's employers have benefited from immigrants' lower costs and their relative high productivity and entrepreneurial spirit. Immigrant communities also provide a valuable bridge to their home countries and facilitate the openings of new markets, transfer of technology, and new investments opportunities here and abroad.

The bulk of the benefits accrue to the immigrant themselves.

Immigrants negatively affect the job opportunities and wages of some native-born. The size of these effects depend on the size of yearly immigration flows, the level of education of immigrants, and the demand for labor in the economy. Given that the majority of immigrants to California have a low level of education, they have negatively affected workers similarly situated at the lower end of the labor market. Also the effect is greater during recessions--as California experienced during the 1990-1994 period--than during period of rapid growth.

The effects of immigrants on the demand for public services depend in part on the level of education of immigrants, and, hence, the wages they command. Because a majority of today's immigrants have a low level of education, they are disproportionately poor. As a result a higher proportion of immigrants than native use public services. However, once differences in income are accounted for, immigrants are no more likely, and in some cases, less likely than native-born to use public services, including welfare and Medicaid.

Education is the public service most affected by immigration because most immigrant women are in their childbearing years and tend to have more children than native-born. Children of immigrants account for more than half of the recent growth in K-12 enrollment and the full effect of this growth on the state's colleges and universities has yet to be felt fully. Because of the low level of education and low income of the parents of many these children, a sizable proportion are "at risk".

### **Policy Challenges**

A key policy challenge facing the state of California concerns education. The number of school age children is expected to continue to increase significantly and so is the size of college age cohorts. A growing share of these school and college age children are the children of immigrants, the majority of whom are born in the United States and are Hispanics. And a growing number of these children are being raised in families with both parents having less than 12 years of education and live in poor families. Although these children are graduating from high school at a rate only slightly lower than their non-Hispanic counterparts, they are going to college at half of the rates of non-Hispanics whites and are three times less likely to graduate with a bachelor degree. Should these trends continue, the outcome will be further increases in inequalities and denial of an opportunity to compete in an economy that is increasingly demanding some college education to a large segment of California's youths.

The key policy challenge confronting California education is two dimensional: (1) the capacity of the K-12 and, and most especially, its postsecondary colleges and universities need to be increased sizably just to maintain current rates at which youths (of all racial/ethnic groups) have been going to college; (2) the rates at which Hispanics and Blacks are going to college and graduating from college with a bachelor degree needs to be increased to avoid an increase in the state's educational (and economic) disparities between racial/ethnic groups. Immigrant adults may be willing to accept large disparities in their economic situation relative to native-born because their standard of living is

generally higher than the one they would experienced had they remained in their home country. Their children raised here, however, can be expected to be less likely to be so accepting of such disparities.

The importance of a rapid acquisition of English for economic success and integration is widely recognized, and immigrants themselves believe it is important to attain English proficiency. Expanding availability of English a second language courses in educational settings as well as in the work place would accelerate this process.

Finally, and in the medium and long-term, California will be more easily able to balance the interests of all of its residents if those who are eligible to become citizens do so. But naturalization is a slow process, slower for some immigrant groups than for others. This process could be accelerated by implementation of a pro-active policy towards naturalization.